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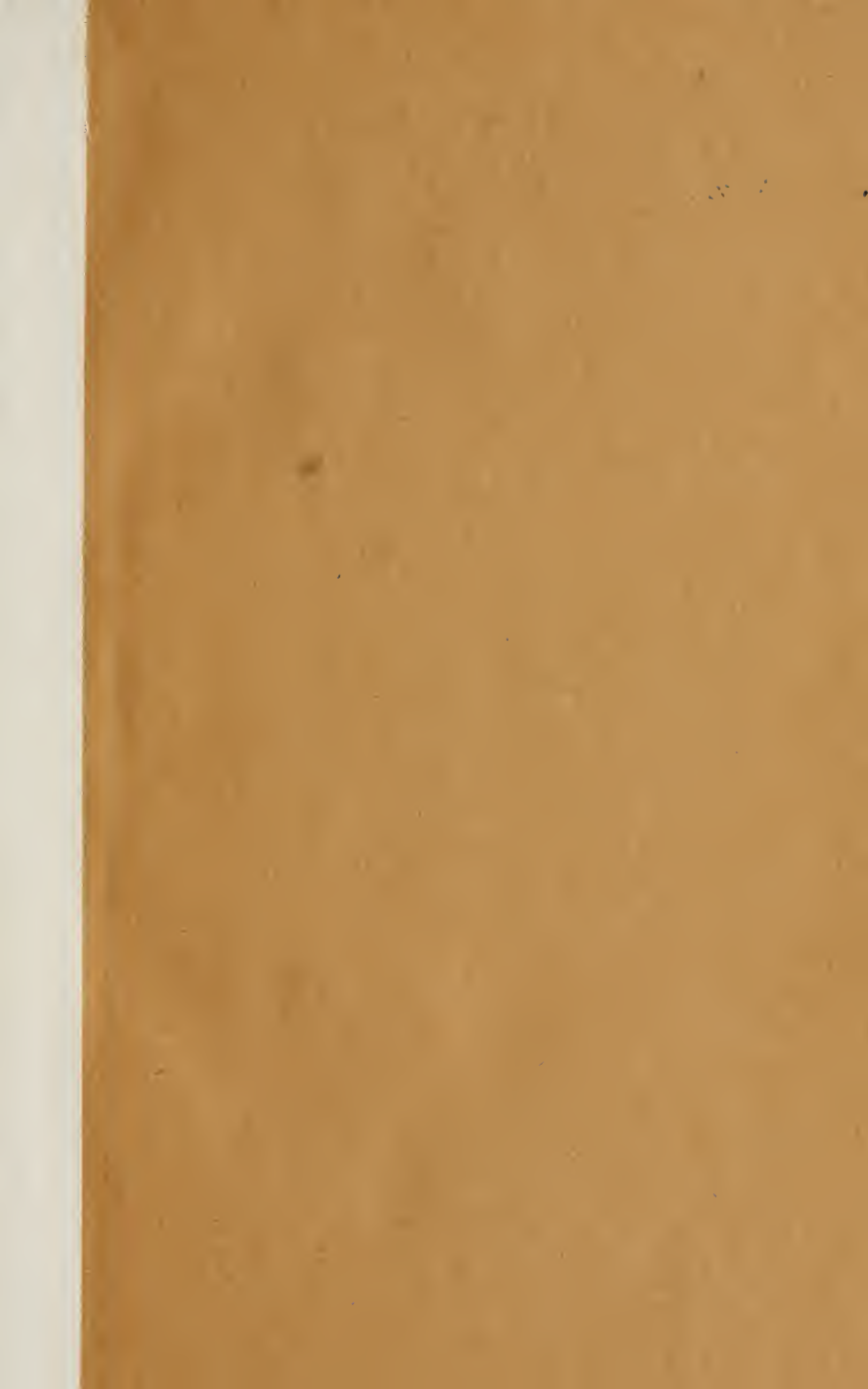


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## CHURCH MUSIC SOCIETY

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## ABOUT HYMNS

CHILSWELL, NEAR OXFORD.

2 October 1911.

It is a difficult subject, and I do not see my way to deal with it. It seems to me that the clergy are the responsible people. If they say that the hymns (words and music) which keep me away from church draw others thither, and excite useful religious emotions, then they must take the responsibility wholly on themselves. I would not choose for them. All I can urge is that they should have at least *one* service a week where people like myself can attend without being offended or moved to laughter. Any society for the improvement of church music, as it appears to me, can deal only with the worthier *music*—and it is for that reason that I have been unable to interest myself in the work of a hymn-committee. For, judging by the number of approved hymns, its aim is to exclude the ‘worst’, and to distinguish the ‘tolerable’ things. But I suppose that the ‘worst’ are often just those very vulgar things that the clergy find so useful. I have always advocated a division of hymns into two classes: (1) the worthiest (e.g. the old church hymns); (2) the rest; and I think that a Church Musical Society should not

meddle with the second class. It seems a pity that editors of recent hymn-books have not seen their way to adopt such division. They would have done better if they had divided their books into two sections, but it is of course difficult to draw the line, and it might be more satisfactory to make three classes.

Now as to words merely, which is what you ask me to deal with. The words are in much the same confusion as the music. I could only approach the subject of words from the musical point of view—and then one of the proper questions that would first arise would be the relation of words to music; and here, how far the artistic form of the hymn-tunes renders the tunes independent of the grammar of the words; e.g. whether the accented notes in the tune require always a corresponding accent in the words. I think that the intelligent hymn-singer is getting much too squeamish on this head. I do not find that an occasional disagreement between accent of words and of music offends me in a hymn. A fine tune is an unalterable artistic form, which pleases in itself and for itself. The notion of its giving way to the words is impossible. The words are better suited if they fit in with *all* the quantities and accents of the tune, but it is almost impossible and not necessary that they should. Their *mood* is what the tune must be true to; and the mood is the main thing. If the tune also incidentally reinforces important words or phrases, that is all the better, and where there are refrains, or repetitions of words, the tune should be designed for them; but the enormous power that the tune has of enforcing or even of creating a mood is the one invaluable thing of magnitude, which overrules every other consideration.

For this reason the tune is more important than the words. It shocks the clergy to tell them this, but they all concede the premisses, viz. (1) that the best words can be rendered invalid or even ridiculous by bad music, and (2) that unworthy words can have a worthy sense imparted to them by good music. Whence of course it follows that (within reasonable limits) the tune is the more important. Whatever hymn the Apostles sang after the Last Supper, you cannot imagine a silly vulgar tune, but with a worthy solemn and pathetic tune almost any words. Put aside archaeology, and try the experiment in your imagination.

Music being the most ideal and supramundane of all the arts, it cannot be equated item for item with poetry. A melody is a whole and the notes which are its units retain none of their meaning when isolated. In the words of hymns the different words have meanings—and no one should expect that the units of the one can be equated with the units of the other.

Again, to suppose that the melody is intended for the *words* (rather than for the mood of them) introduces the critical judgement of their correspondence. How do they fit? Oh, very well, or pretty well, or not at all well—and since it is *impossible* that they should all fit very well, it is plainly wrong to raise an expectation which is bound to be often disappointed, and thus provoke a critical attitude incompatible with emotion. Since it is only good tunes that will justify themselves when they do not fit well with the words, it may very likely be the prevalence of bad tunes—sentimental rubbish—which has made people squeamish about the false accenting of the words.

These considerations do not of course apply to chanting, the essence of which is that it should follow the speech-rhythm; the absurdity of our Anglican chanting is due to the chant being treated as a hymn tune.

How far the general sense of the words of a hymn can be independent of their worthy verbal expression is another question.

ROBERT BRIDGES.

*Extract from a private letter from Mr. Bridges,  
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